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## Bits & Pieces

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Class of 2011

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## Bits & Pieces

### **Keywords**

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### **Author Bio**

Kathleen Flynn is a junior pursuing an English major with a Writing Concentration and really hopes this will help her get a job when she graduates next year. Among her favorite hobbies are reading and daydreaming about going to the places she reads about. Kathleen also spends a great deal of time lost, but this is not a hobby, merely the side-effect of spontaneous and poorly planned travel arrangements. But how else can you have adventures?

# Kathleen Flynn

## *Bits & Pieces*

I've been told I have a great deal in common with my grandmother. I've got her cheekbones and, most importantly, her stubbornness. My grandma was one of the most stubborn and independent women I've ever known. From the time of my grandfather's death up until five years ago, she lived alone in a house in Queens. She walked to Mass, to bridge, and to the library by herself for over forty years.

When I was little, my grandma and my mother were largely responsible for my love of reading. My mom was, and still is, an elementary school teacher, so we read Cam Jansen books instead of watching Nickelodeon. But my grandma would take me to the Bellerose Library, and because it was with her, it was almost like entering an exotic and enchanted world. For some reason, just getting a book from a different library added a thrill to the entire experience. When I was younger, we would pick books with the brightest colors, the most elaborate illustrations, and, of course, a fairy tale plot. With every trip to that library, whose very name evoked two Disney Princesses in particular (Briar Rose and Belle), I would be convinced that this was someplace magical. It didn't hurt that an Indian furniture store was next door, its windows filled with golden Hindu gods and garish carpets.

As I grew older, I started to pick books from her bedroom. I found worn out copies of *Jane Eyre* and shortened, illustrated adaptations of other classics among the novels on her shelves. My mother had read that copy of *Jane Eyre* years before and the pages were musty and butterfly wing-thin. The spine was broken, revealing the vertebrae holding the book together. It hardly looked priceless, but I was heartbroken when the last pages documenting Mr. Rochester's regained sight finally separated from the rest of the book.

My grandmother also taught me how to sew, and we'd sit together, she in her overstuffed lazy boy and me at her feet. I'd always be in charge of threading the needle. It was a difficult task, and I'd often sit for several minutes, tongue pressed against my teeth, as I worked to slip a piece of fine thread through a microscopic hole.

"I need someone to do this for me," she'd say. "It's my old eyes, you see."

And she'd wink at me.

Eventually, I became somewhat good at sewing, and my stitches became neat and fine instead of a tangled mess. After tackling a few felt Christmas ornaments, I made her a quilt pillow. It was my greatest achievement; it had a square of every tacky Christmas fabric I could find. There were smiling Christmas trees, one white box speckled with holly and multiple sections of my fabric featuring dancing bears in Santa hats. It was the most grotesque, Frankenstein-like quilted pillow ever but my grandmother loved it.

It got to the point where my grandmother helped me to make clothes for my Barbies. Before this, I only played with the Disney Mattel dolls, pairing up Cinderella with my brother's G.I. Joe since guy dolls were scarce. Once I could make my own dresses, I started buying my own dolls and making them into the characters out of the books I'd read. My grandma always got the final say in what fabrics I would eventually use. The one I remember best was sky blue with silver, sparkling swirls. I went home and made my own Cinderella dress. The sleeves were lopsided and the bodice incredibly tight, but I like to think G.I. Joe appreciated it.

This all came to an abrupt end after one trip to the eye doctor. My grandmother had been having difficulty seeing while driving, a situation that was not exactly ideal for innocent bystanders or other cars. My dad took "Mother Magoo," as he fondly called her, to the doctor to see whether or not she needed a stronger prescription for her glasses. He dropped her off and proceeded to take a nap in the driver's seat. Mother Magoo then lived up to her name. After a series of tests, the doctor sent her home to wait for the results. She stood at the entrance of the parking lot looking for our mammoth blue van. Strangely, she couldn't make it out and walked up and down the rows of cars, searching for my father. She passed him several times before he finally woke up and called out to her.

The results came back a day later. The optometrist informed my grandmother that she had a form of wet macular degeneration. According to the doctor, she was slowly losing her eyesight as blood vessels multiplied excessively in the choriocapillaries through the Bruch's membrane on her retinas. As the blood vessels grew, bleeding, leaking and scarring would lead to rapid vision loss since they hadn't caught it early enough. I didn't understand the disease at the time and my mom had to explain it to me in less scientific terms. According to her, the eyes were almost like a movie theater. Parts of the eye were like the projector while others, specifically the retina, were like the screen. The screen of my grandmother's eyes was deteriorating, its surface slowly going blank and dark as blood vessels swarmed like creeping ivy on a brick wall. There was no treatment for the disease at the time and surgery was the only option. Given her age, however, the doctors were reluctant to take that drastic step.

The reason why she was unable to find my father's car was finally understood. The doctor informed the family that people with macular degeneration have a difficult time discerning colors. Even if our car was distinctive in its shape and size, she wouldn't have been able to tell the difference between a navy blue van from a violent purple one. She was also considered legally blind and shouldn't have been behind the wheel of a car, a thought that horrified my mother since my grandmother frequently picked us up from school in her old car. The doctor also revealed that her central vision would start to fade as shapes and lines began to morph and coalesce together. Without central vision, the doctor said, it would not be possible to read.

My grandmother's hobbies quickly narrowed down to simply walking. There was no more sewing, no more reading. My mom—tried desperately to come up with alternatives. She found incredible magnifying glasses equipped with lights on the end that were supposed to make reading easier for people with poor eyesight. But my grandmother never fully took to the technology and stubbornly walked to the library to take out the large print books even though she could barely make out the letters. She also continued to wear her watch around her knobby wrist even though the numbers could have been written in Egyptian hieroglyphs for all the sense she could make of them. But that watch stayed, the loose threads fraying with time as hours backed up.

After the diagnosis, my grandmother quickly stopped being the person I idealized. It's difficult to admit that that one physical flaw changed everything. If she asked me what I was reading, I'd immediately press my face closer to the novel and mutter something along the lines of, "It's just a book." I hope that most of this bratty behavior was the result of teenage angst; I've grown out of refusing to let her know even the title of what I was reading, but I still dread visiting her in the nursing home.

After her fall five years ago, there was a swift progression from an assisted living facility to nursing home with trips to the hospital interspersed between them. At the same time, her personal possessions have steadily decreased in number since she had less personal space in each place. Before moving into the first assisted living place, my grandma had a bit of reputation of being a pack rat. Her basement was a treasure trove of plastic bags and other vintage junk from the 1950s. When we went through the house to pack things away, I remember standing by the bookshelf, my finger brushing against the stiff spines. There was my uncle's copy of *Catch 22*; there was a copy of an Irish anthology of murder mysteries. Those two books now sit in my room, the molting grandparents of newer fiction.

Today, my grandmother's personal possessions are limited to those on the nightstand next to her bed. Her wedding picture rests next to a collection of photographs of her grandchildren. Yet, she can barely

make out the faces of the people who visit her let alone the grainy black and white wedding picture. There's a television in the room as well, but it's never on unless my father watches Fox News while my mom spoon feeds pulverized peas and something generously called ham to her mother. My grandmother often looks at her watch which has long since stopped working, the hands frozen under glass that slowly grows more opaque as time passes. My sister visits my grandmother frequently, but I avoid the nursing home with its powerful smell of Lysol, that houses a woman that I can no longer recognize as my grandmother.

Macular degeneration is genetic; it's highly possible that I might inherit that along with my grandmother's cheekbones and hands. The life-time risk of developing late-stage macular degeneration is fifty percent for people with a relative with the disease. Perhaps, this could explain my reluctance to visit her. The idea of my world slowly darkening and becoming filled with shadows instead of color horrifies me. On certain websites describing macular degeneration, they show simulations of what it is like to look at the world through degenerating eyes. That world is filled with inkblots and abstract shades of gray. As an avid people watcher, it's not a universe I want to inhabit. I like shapes, clearly defined and sharply contrasted against each other. Gray isn't acceptable either; I need to see the ruby and gilded leaves in autumn, the velvet navy background of the night sky. Touch may be nice, music lovely, but sight is essential to me.

The leather of my grandmother's watch has worn through; the pages of the books she gave me are now nearly transparent. Yet the foundation she gave me still holds strong, permanent as her genes stamped on my cheekbones.